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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001616

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AKP LAYS ISTANBUL GROUNDWORK FOR MARCH 28 LOCAL ELECTIONS

REF: ANKARA 6447

Classified By: Acting Consul General Stuart Smith for Reasons 1.5 (b&d)

[11.](#) (sbu) Summary: Following Ruling AK Party national congress (reftel), the Istanbul AK Party organization is gearing up vigorously at the grassroots level for next year's March 28 municipal elections. Not content merely to rely on the party's performance at the national level, the Istanbul AK Party organization's grassroots outreach campaign is already well under way. Although no decision has been made on who will be the AK Party candidate for the Greater Istanbul Mayoralty, it now appears likely that Prime Minister and AK Party Chairman Tayyip Erdogan will pass over current independent Mayor Ali Mufit Gurtuna in favor of someone closer to him and the party. End Summary.

[12.](#) (sbu) Continuing strong support in the greater urban sprawl for Tayyip Erdogan owing to his attention to city services and infrastructure during his 1994-1998 tenure as mayor; the failure of the opposition CHP to reach the man in the street; the collapse of Cem Uzan's Genc Party's popularity (following the exposure of financial scandals and corruption in his family conglomerate), and the absence of any other rising political challenges make the AK Party the heavy favorite in the upcoming municipal elections in Istanbul. Gurtuna's chances of being welcomed into the AK Party have always hinged on whether the party would need his name recognition to win the upcoming local elections and whether he and Erdogan could overcome their mutual antipathy. It now appears to us that, rather than coopting Mayor Gurtuna, PM Erdogan will probably feel comfortable nominating a lesser known candidate to challenge him.

[13.](#) (u) On October 26, AK invited 2,500 assorted artists, athletes, journalists, civil society leaders, and ordinary citizens as part of its grassroots outreach campaign under the "AK Platform"-banner. PM Erdogan, Istanbul Province AK Chairman Muezzinoglu, and other assorted party luminaries listened to short speeches by attendees detailing their views on, and possible solutions to, Istanbul's problems (similar meetings have already been held in each of Istanbul's 32 sub-provinces). Much of the criticism was directed at the notably-absent Mayor Gurtuna and several speeches called on AK to challenge him in the upcoming elections. President of the Artisans (Esnaflar) Chamber Suat Yalkin, for example, publicly praised Erdogan and AK and promised to support and endorse a mayoral candidate "close to the Prime Minister."

[14.](#) (c) AK founding member Serap Yasar told poloff privately that there will be meetings in the coming weeks to discuss AK's mayoral candidate with a decision expected by November [15.](#) Yasar was dismissive of Gurtuna's chances. Istanbul Vice Chairman (and master of ceremony at the conference) Murat Yalcintas and another AK founding member Mukaddes Misiroglu later told poloff that they too saw Gurtuna's chances as slim, but "never to say never" in Turkish politics. All agreed that the choice would ultimate come down to Party Chairman Erdogan himself.

[15.](#) (u) Without criticizing the current mayor directly, PM Erdogan's speech remarked on the problems still facing the city, including uncontrolled migration and overcrowded classrooms. Erdogan also promised to deliver public administration reform to give the local mayors and district mayors the authority to tackle problems locally. President of the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD) Ali Bayramoglu touched on the same subject, saying that "only Istanbul can solve Istanbul's problems" (Note: Bayramoglu is often mentioned as a possible AK candidate for mayor).

[16.](#) (c) In lengthy discussions with us, Muezzinoglu, Gaziosmanpasa sub-province chairman Subasi, and a group of

leading party activists from Eyup sub-province also laid out the party's block-by-block structure, e.g., each polling booth neighborhood is canvassed door-to-door by a four-member team with a rep each from the party's women's and youth branches joining two more senior local reps. Eyup reps added that they start each day as if the party is at zero percent rather than the 40%-45% level party polls indicate. Noting that he monitors the provincial party activity through a regularized stream of reports up from the base, Muezzinoglu also underscored that no one is relaxing: his goal is to reach 51% of the vote in the elections.

17. (c) Comment: Not content to rest on their laurels, the Istanbul AK Party organization is preparing to use the same successful electoral strategy they used last year: Party Chairman Erdogan's charisma combined with meticulous grassroots campaigning. Carried out by tens of thousands of activists and volunteers, AK already has a clear jump on the competition in local campaigning and is not relaxing its pace. Nothing is a foregone conclusion, however. The choice of candidates is particularly important in municipal elections. Moreover, while Erdogan's handpicked provincial chairman Muezzinoglu, a surgeon, is highly organized, he is relatively untested in the political arena.
SMITH